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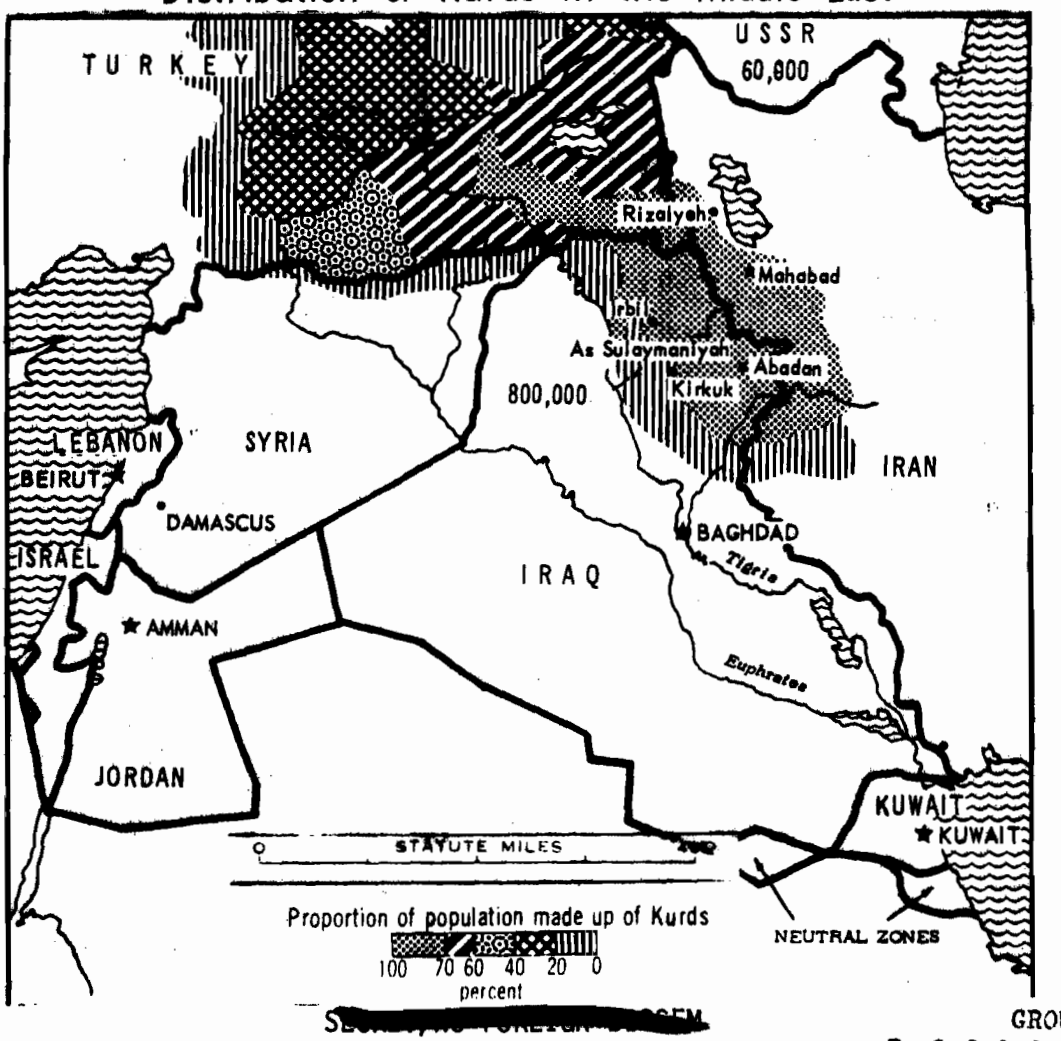
THE KURDS OF IRAQ: RENEWED INSURGENCY?

The Iraqi Kurds are once again soliciting outside support for a possible renewal of their civil war with the Iraq government. This paper analyzes the background of Kurdish-Iraqi differences, their setting in Iraqi-Iranian and inter-Arab relations, and the chances of another outbreak and its probable results.

Distribution of Kurds in the Middle East



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ABSTRACT

Living since remote antiquity in much the same mountainous area where they are presently found, the Kurdish people, now numbering around six million, have complicated the relations of all the modern states whose borders they overlap -- the USSR, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the latest leader with the gifts needed to unite several tribes into a formidable paramilitary force, rose first against the Iraqi monarchy in the 1940's, was expelled to Iran, and then to the USSR where he lived for eleven years and learned to distrust the Soviets. He returned to Iraq shortly after the 1958 revolution. In 1961, having made himself uncontested leader among the Kurdish tribes, Mustafa led a guerrilla war that continued under, and helped to precipitate, four changes of regime. During most of the four years of intensive fighting, Mulla Mustafa's forces had assistance and supplies from Iran and, the Iraqis suspected, from other countries as well, through Iran. Iranian considerations were to fend off Nasser's influence on a weak neighbor, and to prevent the disturbance from spreading among Iran's own Kurds.

The present Ba'th regime in Iraq has been under some pressure from other Arab states to satisfy the Kurds so as to have the Iraqi army, which was entirely tied down during the height of the insurgency, available in the event of full-scale Arab-Israeli hostilities. The Soviets have consistently urged Iraq to handle the Kurds as they do

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their national minorities. Moscow may have played a role in a fairly generous unilateral offer of settlement which the government advanced and the Kurds accepted in 1970, but which has never been fully implemented. Now intent on solidifying relations with Iraq through a new treaty and extensive military and technical assistance programs, the USSR does not want to be caught between Iraq, Iran, and the Kurds in a disruptive civil war. The Soviets are pressing the Kurds to join in a National Front Government with the ruling Ba'th Party and the Communist Party of Iraq. Mulla Mustafa correctly foresees the loss of the de facto regional autonomy the Kurds have won by force of arms, if they consent to this plan. He is aware that the government and, he believes, the Soviets also, were behind attempts to assassinate him and his elder son Idris last summer, and he thoroughly distrusts both of the other parties to this proposed coalition. Barzani also knows that the government has lately tried to buy support among anti-Barzani tribes and has sought to undermine him by bribing some of his followers.

A younger, reformist, and leftist faction does exist among the Kurds. Its spokesman, Jalal Talabani, gives his loyalty to Barzani in time of conflict but opposes his program when at peace. Although he has far less influence than Barzani (none at all among the traditional, semi-feudal tribesmen), he offers the sort of leadership that the government (and the Soviets) would prefer to build up at

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Barzani's expense. If he does not fight, Barzani's personal leadership is likely to be gradually eroded by such tactics. Time is also against him (he is 69 years old, though still vigorous); so is the fact that his war-weary followers may be reluctant to take up arms again so soon after the long, wearing struggle of the 1960's.

Chances look better than even, however, that Mulla Mustafa will find sufficient outside support to renew his insurgency. If he does, he cannot look forward to more than holding his own in his mountain fastness. The added strain of another Kurdish war could bring down the unpopular Ba'th government. However, the Kurds probably would not be able to determine the composition of the next regime. Nor would any likely Iraqi successors be more stable, stronger, or very much less dependent on the USSR than the present government.

Mulla Mustafa
al-Barzani

A "Marshal" in the USSR.

A later photo.

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Barzani, whose personal appeal has been stronger than any Kurdish figure of this generation, has strictly refrained from political agitation or organizing among Kurds in neighboring countries. The younger, leftist leadership that might succeed him is unlikely to be as discreet. And the Soviets, should they become directly involved in Kurdish affairs, would have on hand a difficult political situation, but also a means for pressure on Iran, and on a lesser scale on Turkey, if they chose to use it.

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I. Background

Who and Where are the Kurds?

The Kurds, a distinctive Indo-European ethnic group, form the majority population of a mountainous territory approximately 150,000 square miles in size which overlaps the boundaries of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan. This traditional "Kurdistan" has never had separate political status and therefore is not precisely defined. There are a few communities outside this Kurdish heartland in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, and a scattering in Afghanistan and Lebanon. There are no accurate population figures; most national censuses do not distinguish Kurds, but reliable estimates put their total number at between five and six million, of which 89,000 are in the USSR.

Of the Kurds outside Soviet territory, nearly half are in Turkey, where they are the largest minority, 3 million, or about 8%. They are also a significant minority in Iran (1,050,000, approximately 3%), Iraq (1,795,000, or 18%), and Syria (around 240,000). Nearly all Kurds are Sunni (orthodox) Muslim; about 25,000 in Iraq are Yezidi (a heterodox offshoot of Shia Islam with pagan and Christian intermixtures), and a third or less of Iranian Kurds are Shia Muslim, the predominant religion of Iran.

Kurds have inhabited their mountain fastnesses since antiquity: they were described by Xenophon, and identified by classical historians as "Karduchoi" or "Gurti" (Iranian Kurds sometimes call themselves, inaccurately, descendents of the ancient Medes). They are mountaineers, mostly pastoral nomads or semi-nomads, although some are settled and some urbanized. Kurds are a proud, tough, competent people: educated Kurds have held high positions in their countries of residence. Possessing a strong sense of identity and historical tradition, they stoutly resist assimilation, especially in Arab countries, for they are traditionally and universally contemptuous of Arabs.

The political independence Kurds have long desired, and petitioned for at World War I peace conferences, is blocked largely by fierce and divisive tribal loyalties that make Kurds, even among themselves, suspicious acquaintances and determined enemies. Lack of intercommunication in their mountainous terrain has preserved three distinct Kurdish dialects that are scarcely intelligible to one other. The speech of the Sulaymaniya region in Iraq is nearest to an accepted "official" language. There are some 23 major tribal groupings, of which the most important are the Dizai, Herki, and Jaf. (The Barzani are not a tribe, but a confederation of villages united by an early nineteenth century religious movement.)

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Frequent Rebellions

Serious uprisings have challenged the local governments only when a single leader has appeared with sufficient talent to unite several tribes. Such revolts occurred in Iran in the 1920's, and in Iraq in 1931 led by the late Shaykh Mahmud (father of Baba Ali, a former cabinet minister and occasional neutral negotiator during the civil war).

Mulla Mustafa Barzani first rose against the Iraqi monarchy in the 1940's and was expelled with his followers to northern Iran, where he took part in the short-lived "Kurdish Republic of Mahabad" fostered by the Soviets in the part of Iran they had occupied during World War II. When Soviet forces withdrew in 1946, the "Republic" was quickly crushed and Mulla Mustafa with about 500 followers fled in 1947 to Soviet territory, where they remained for eleven years.

The Turkish Republic has made strenuous efforts to "Turkify" its Kurdish populace, and believes that the Kurds now constitute no political danger, although there is still latent sympathy among them for Kurdish independence. At the height of the Iraqi civil strife in the 1960's, several hundred Turkish Kurds exfiltrated to join their Iraqi brethren. Iranian Kurds have been consistently critical of the government, largely on grounds of alleged economic discrimination. The Iraqi uprising, among other effects, brought about some hasty economic reforms in Iranian Kurdistan.

The Kurds and Arab Politics

In Iraq, the Kurds carry political weight beyond their numbers because of the peculiar religious fractioning of the country. Iraq's Arab population is almost equally divided between the orthodox Sunni and heterodox Shi'a sects of Islam: Shi'a are actually somewhat more numerous, but for historical reasons the ruling group is almost exclusively Sunni. The Kurds, ethnically distinct but religiously orthodox, thus hold the balance of power. The Iraq government has resisted Kurdish demands for local autonomy because of this religious balance; because it fears that were these demands granted, the Shi'a and other, smaller minorities would demand the same prerogatives; and because Iraq's oldest and largest oil-producing area lies in Kurdish territory.

From the time they were made unwilling parts of the two Arab states following World War I, a cardinal interest of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds has been to oppose any sort of Arab union, in which they would be an even smaller minority. Hence they opposed the abortive anti-Nasser union of Iraq and Jordan in 1958, and also opposed Nasser insofar as he advocated Arab unity. They are equally negative toward the Ba'th, the present Iraqi ruling party, which is pro-Arab-union as an article of dogma. At times they have sought to play off Nasserites and Ba'this against each other.

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II. Civil War in Iraq, 1960-1970

The Insurgency

Shortly after the 1958 revolution, when Qasim was replacing national leaders who had cooperated with the former regime, he amnestied Mulla Mustafa, invited him and his followers to return from exile, and publicly lionized him. Qasim had miscalculated the extent to which Mulla Mustafa was still a symbol of resistance to central government. His attentions to the Kurdish chief roused a ferment of irredentist feeling that went beyond any concessions Qasim was prepared to make. Too late, Qasim attempted to subsidize anti-Barzani tribes to put a check on the developing Kurdish movement. Inter-tribal fighting broke out in August 1960; by July 1961 Barzani had put his tribal enemies to flight or reduced them to submission. Earlier Kurdish cultural and economic demands based on full implementation of the 1958 Iraqi constitution had by then become a proposal for an Arab-Kurdish federal state with joint capitals at Baghdad and Sulaimaniya.* From mid-September 1961, the Iraq government resorted to aerial bombing, and in 1963 experimented briefly with poison gas. (The latter tactic, besides being unsuccessful militarily, was embarrassing when a changing wind blew some gas across the border where it affected several Iranian villagers and some animals.)

The conflict quickly became a typical guerrilla situation, with the Kurds in full control of the northern mountain area and ranging freely as far south as the Lesser Zab river and West to Jabal Hamrin. They made no attempt to control major towns of the plain, such as Erbil and Kirkuk, or important highways, but interdicted roads or surrounded towns selectively almost at will. In the area under their control -- over 11,000 square miles, the combined size of Maryland and Delaware -- the Kurds were the effective government, collecting taxes (unfortunates in the disputed areas had to pay twice!), assessing tariffs, and conducting day-to-day administration. With intermissions for winter weather and for occasional tries at negotiation, this situation dragged on for eight years, with the Kurds unable permanently to extend their perimeter, and government forces incapable of a clear-cut victory. During most of that time, the Pesh Merga (Kurdish irregulars) engaged and successfully held four-fifths of the Iraqi armed forces -- for brief periods, even larger proportions of the government's strength. Most of the Kurds in responsible government positions either were ousted for security reasons or resigned; hundreds of Kurds, including two general officers, defected to the Kurdish side.

*Realistically, the Kurdish leadership did not then or later demand independence, only varying degrees of autonomy within the Iraqi state.

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The drain of the inconclusive civil war was one cause of public and army disaffection with a succession of Iraqi regimes during this decade, hence an important reason for their rapid turnover. Coup plotters necessarily took Kurdish affairs into account and Kurdish leaders into their confidence: for the first time in Iraqi history, Kurds took a direct part in making and unmaking national governments. Thus when the Kurds promise potential backers that they will help bring down the Iraq government, they have the warrant of having indeed done so, although never single-handedly.

External Contacts

Aid and Supply -- Obviously, the Kurds could not have sustained nine years of civil war without outside assistance. Virtually all of the aid they received came from, or through, Iran -- at first as private donations from fellow Kurds across the nearly unpoliced Iranian border. Later, when the Shah feared a weak neighboring government dominated by Nasser, it became an open secret that Iran was providing training, materiel, and medical services. Mulla Mustafa agreed, in return, not to recruit or agitate among Iranian Kurds, and scrupulously kept his word. The Iraq government insisted against all assurances that, because of the CENTO relationship, this activity must be taking place with US consent if not participation, and this conviction prejudiced Iraq-US relations from about 1963 until they were broken off during the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The Iraqis also suspected the UK, because of its oil interests, and Israel, for obvious reasons, of supplying the insurgents.

Although Mulla Mustafa seems sincerely to prefer Western aid, he was and is willing to take help from any source. According to a long-time friend, Mustafa, while attending the Soviet military academy during his exile, was assigned a project to design a road and communications net linking Iraqi Kurdistan with Soviet Armenia across northern Iran, and was encouraged to believe that a Kurdish revolt would have Soviet support. In December 1960 - January 1961 (seven months before hostilities began), Mustafa went to Moscow and pleaded the cause of Kurdish nationalism before a Communist Party meeting. The Soviets, busily cultivating a newly-leftist Iraq government, then rebuffed him. However, in 1963, when the Ba'th had come to power and was persecuting Iraqi communists, the Soviets bought safe-haven in Kurdish-held territory for communist escapees from the south in return for two or three plane loads of light arms. In the main, the Soviets, like the US, treated the conflict as a domestic affair, meanwhile urging the Baghdad government to be more flexible and consistent in seeking a solution. Mulla Mustafa, on his part, feels he was used and betrayed by the Soviets and thoroughly distrusts them.

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Political Efforts -- From late 1962 through 1965 the Kurdish leadership tried by every means to internationalize their quarrel and to attract outside political as well as material support. They employed the services of Kurdish expatriates resident abroad and travelling emissaries, both accredited by personal letters as representatives of Mustafa. Ismet Sharif Vanly, head of a Kurdish student organization in Europe, travelled widely on that continent and twice visited the US. In 1964 Vanly presented an appeal to the International Red Cross in Geneva, and in June 1965 he unsuccessfully sought access to the UN in the Kurdish cause.

Mulla Mustafa's emissaries kept in close contact with the US through, at first, the US Consulate in Tabriz, Iran, and later the Embassies in Tehran, Baghdad, and Beirut. Mustafa addressed at least two letters to President Johnson and several to the Shah of Iran. Private contacts in the US included Justice William O. Douglas, several members of Congress, and heads of several Zionist organizations.

During the truce of 1963-64, the US attempted to arrange PL-480 relief for the Kurds in the form of reconstruction work projects for food. CARE was to be the supervising agency. The Iraq government, however, impeded the delivery of this relief and succeeded in misdirecting most of it to pro-government Kurds only. Because the safeguards required by law could not be arranged, these projects had to be discontinued.

Disunity in Unity -- Even during the height of the uprising, Kurdish unity was never absolute. Some Kurdish mercenary irregulars fought on the government side throughout the intermittent war; some entire tribes and sub-tribes changed sides from time to time. Other families reinsured their fortunes by having a branch stay neutral, or one on each side of the conflict. At its largest, following a meeting at Koi Sanjaq in May 1963, the rebel confederation comprised all of the important tribal groups as well as the leftist, urban, and politically-oriented Democratic Party of Iraqi Kurdistan (DPIK), and the smaller northern minorities, (Yezidis, Turcomans, etc.), and was directed by a quasi-government "Revolutionary Command Council," on which representatives of the Syrian Kurds also sat. There was more or less constant tension, however, between the politicized urban element, of which the leading figures were Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani, and the traditional tribal aghas typified by Mulla Mustafa. This animosity -- essentially a contest to control the shape of the settlement and of post-war Kurdish society -- broke into the open shortly after Koi Sanjaq. A long truce with the government (1964-65) was punctuated by sharp skirmishes between these two factions. Mustafa won, and Talabani later returned to the fold.

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On at least two occasions, apparently with Iranian advice, the Kurds have also been in touch with the alienated, socially and religiously conservative Shia, trying unsuccessfully to raise a second front in southern Iraq.

The War Winds Down. Although a ceasefire was reached in February 1964, with an exchange of terms promising a negotiated settlement to follow, the agreed arrangements were never fully honored by either side. The Kurds kept most of their arms; the government continued to hold Kurdish prisoners it had promised to release, and never paid all of the reparations it had agreed to. The Kurds have continued to petition the government from time to time about the unfinished business of settlement, but Kurdish affairs have remained at a stalemate. The last sharp fighting occurred in 1965, and ended with Iraqi forces occupying heights commanding the trails by which the Pesh Merga had been receiving supplies from Iran.

A sullen and uneasy truce followed until, on March 11, 1970, the Iraq government unilaterally proposed a peace agreement that contained much of what the Kurds had asked for. Although the Kurds readily agreed to these terms, only some of the cultural provisions have been actually carried out, and in September 1971 agents personally accountable to Iraqi strongman Saddam Husayn al-Tikriti attempted to assassinate Mustafa by planting explosives in his automobile, having earlier fired on his son, Idris. Given this long history of broken agreements, each side is deeply distrustful of the other.

Among the still-unfilled conditions of settlement the most important in Kurdish eyes are:

1) Delimitation of the Kurdish area, including portions, to be determined by plebiscite, of Kirkuk province.

2) A Kurdish Vice President in the central government. (The Kurds also want representation on the Revolutionary Command Council, the government's actual decision-making body.)

3) A national census to determine Kurdish representation in any future legislature.

4) Control of security forces in the designated Kurdish area. This demand is again being pressed, following a rash of false arrests and counter-kidnappings last summer. The Kurds have also demanded safeguards against Iraq's union with any other Arab country or countries.

Deteriorating relations with neighboring Iran have also depressed relations between the government and the Kurds. Suspecting that Iran was plotting a coup against the Ba'th, and infuriated at Iranian

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seizure of some small islands in the Gulf in 1971, Iraq has conspired to raise trouble in the predominantly Arab-populated province of Khuzistan in southern Iran, and has expelled about 60,000 Iraqi residents of Iranian origin. The Iraq government says that it asked the Kurds, as an earnest of peaceful intentions, to cut off all contact with Iran. The Kurds claim that the government asked them to raise a revolt among Iranian Kurds, which they refused to do. Whichever version is true, this issue has become a major cause of the latest ill feeling.

Even for Kurds, Not Always a Way

Mulla Mustafa is not likely to join in a National Front with the Iraqi communists and the Ba'th, as he is being pressured to do. The Kurds have little to gain and much to lose by that course. There remains the question of whether to resume fighting, and on this the Kurds are divided. The DPK might vote to accept a government subsidy that has allegedly been offered, and subside for the time being, still maintaining its demands and its latent animosity toward the central government. More likely, if he can obtain the outside help he needs from Iran or elsewhere -- and there is a good chance that he can because of uneasiness over the new Iraqi-Soviet treaty -- Mustafa will call out his Pesh Merga and reopen hostilities.

Mulla Mustafa is 69 years old; he sees the goals that his people fought for and almost attained slipping away unless he can force some substantial political gains in what may be his last campaign. He probably also foresees that if he declines this challenge, his personal leadership is doomed. The Iraq government well knows that Mulla Mustafa is the only Kurdish leader who can unite his people to the point of armed insurgency. If assassination fails, as it did last year, the government will seek other ways to undercut and destroy him. Reportedly, its agents are already paying and arming anti-Barzani tribes, and trying to bribe the Pesh Merga individually to lay down their arms. Also, the government is treating with Jalal Talabani, Mustafa's younger rival during the last insurgency, who talks of social reform in a communist vocabulary (although he probably is not a communist), and whose vision of the future of Kurdistan doubtless conforms much more to the style of the present regime. By giving precedence to and working through Kurds of this type, the government eventually can wean away much of Mustafa's following, given conditions of peace.

A stumbling block of unknown proportion in any Kurdish plans to resume the conflict is the war-weariness of the Kurdish people themselves, who have had a little over five years of relative peace to begin to recover from four years of hard fighting, and who cannot be eager to take up arms again. A correspondent for Le Monde who explored Kurdish views early in April 1972 found younger, urban Kurds saying that they have already won better conditions than any of the neighboring Kurdish groups, even if not all they wished,

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and that to go to war now would risk missing out on Soviet-aided development plans which are already beginning to accelerate the economy in the rest of Iraq.

Having at last achieved better relations with Iran, and invested a great deal in the present government of Iraq, the Soviets cannot wish the Kurds to stir up trouble in either direction. They would strive, through a combination of pressure and bribery, to induce the Kurds to settle down and conform to the government's plans. Having gone so far as to make direct approaches in the matter, however, the Soviets would be almost forced to come in with advice and help on the government's side if the Kurds do take up arms, at the risk of damaging Soviet relations with Iran, with their own Kurds, and with national minorities elsewhere that they might wish to champion. Reportedly, the Soviets foresaw possible embarrassment of this sort when Iraqi leaders sought a treaty relationship with them.

Should hostilities reopen, Mustafa and his following might at worst be expelled from Iraq, or worn down in a longer and costlier struggle than before. At best, he could achieve no more than the stalemate he reached before, maintaining a hold on his northern mountain rim.

Meanwhile, a long-drawn-out insurgency might indeed bring down the already unpopular Ba'th government, but it is by no means sure that the Kurds could then determine the character of a successor regime. The Iraqi exiles with whom they reportedly are planning do not offer, on past performance, much chance of a stable and viable government.

Nor would they likely expel Soviet interests, since the entire Iraqi military machine and much of the development plan are dependent on Soviet assistance. Relations with the Soviets might, of course, be more cautious, and the controversial treaty might become a dead letter. The Soviets also could experience a backlash of public resentment from their close identification with the unpopular Ba'th regime.

A complaisant pro-Ba'th or even pro-Soviet clique in control of Iraqi Kurdistan could of course bring pressure on Iran and even create a nuisance in eastern Turkey. Indeed, this seems to be one of the Iraqi leaders', though not the Soviets', incentives in bringing matters to a head in Iraqi Kurdistan.